

NEBOJŠA VASIĆ¹

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zenica, BiH

SOCRATES' ZEN BUDDHISM

Abstract: Zen Buddhism is just one of many paths of enlightenment which thrusts all hindrances aside as a vigorous attempt to move directly to the goal. Similar to Socrates' philosophy Zen Buddhism rejects verbosity and mere descriptions; it has no patience for academic subtleties and bereft of doctrinal teaching insists on dialogues instead of a rational exposition to metaphysical questions. The common standards of logic and sound reasoning in Zen Buddhism (just like Socrates' philosophy) do not play crucial role; moreover typical *ex-cathedra* approach is abandoned in favor of bridging the chasm between conceptual notions and first-hand experience. Words and depictions only indicate "the unknown" which is far above theory, sermons and lecturing. Therefore Zen is often labeled as "straightforwardness", in other words it is immediate awareness of the ever-changeable flow of life, miles distinct from the mere rationalizations which are nothing but dead symbols of a living reality. Socrates teaching and Zen cherish the idea of the immediateness of actions thus expressing the idea of "spiritual poverty" as well as the meaninglessness of rigid definitions which veil "the ultimate truth" and distract seekers from "a bee-line" to *satori*. The idea of possession is illusory (be it material or spiritual possession); consequently life can never be grasped or precisely defined – in other words elusive substance of life is close to the notion of non-attachment. Spiritual freedom is revealed in human innate capacity to follow the ever-changeable flow of life avoiding both extremes – one which is a blind acceptance of fate and the other barrenness of hectic pace of our modern world.

Keywords: Socrates, Zen Buddhism, dialogue, *satori*, straightforwardness, "the ultimate truth", elusive substance, spiritual poverty

INTRODUCTION

Having in mind the complexity of Socrates' (469 – 399 BCE) philosophy² on one side and the subtlety of Zen Buddhism on the other side, the topic is truly challenging. We will commence this meditation with Socrates, who was

1 Author's e-mail address: neb.vasic@gmail.com

2 See more; Željko Škuljević (2011), *U Sokratu se krije Sokrat*, Zenica:Hijatus.

born in Athens in 469 BCE as the son of a midwife and a stonemason. The very walks of life of his parents had a symbolic meaning – namely a midwife in a metaphorical sense of the word supports the idea of eliciting truth from even illiterate people (the truth as the divine spark deeply embedded in human nature), while a stonemason signifies the firmness of highest ethical principles – as the foundation of Socrates' philosophy. After the Peloponnesian war Socrates inherited enough money to lead a solitary life of a philosopher (in the Eastern spirit – a *guru*³) who soon became a familiar sight among his fellow citizens, engaging himself in philosophical discussion with whomever was willing to partake in the search for sublime truth. Socrates' essential seclusion doesn't contradict the fact that he was married (Xanthippe was grumpy woman bereft of the philosophical inclination), or his frequent discussions with young disciples (it is notorious truth that most profound philosophers are rarely acknowledged among their contemporaries). Socrates' epistemological insights tend to deny the worthiness⁴ of life if it is left unexamined as the trivial passage through the mundane routine. Such ontological emptiness in the Eastern philosophy is expressed by the concept of *samsara*⁵ ("continuous flow" or "the wheel of life") depicted as the realm and jurisdiction of pure evil. Socrates claimed the only true nobility is found in a virtuous life similar to the Buddhistic ultimate realization of truth (*moksha*),⁶ which is attainable only if we follow the guidelines of the highest ethical standards.

SOCRATES AND ZEN BUDDHISTIC NOTION OF VIRTUE

Socrates as one of the founders of the Western philosophy confirmed himself as the citizen of the world, thus transcending narrow confines of the nationalistic minds which are proudly and frivolously emerged into the suffocating borders of shallow values. Although Socrates lived in the Athenian golden age, he was not reduced to the level of arrogant dignitaries who are predominantly ruled by the law of multitude – in other words, the worst translator of truth. Being above the claustrophobic mental prison, Socrates is one of the first scholars who fostered the idea of the universal values without losing the perspective of inherent qualities of the society in which he lived. Small and conceited minds never reach the level of substantial (universal) values – therefore, their "sanctuary" is often the bloody altar of savage patri-

3 A religious teacher and spiritual guide especially in Indian religions.

4 See in the „The Philosophy book“ edited by Sam Atkinson (2011), DK London, p. 46.

5 The concept of *samsara* is associated with belief that one continues to be born and reborn in various realms in the form of a human, animal or other being.

6 Moksha means liberation from rebirth of *samsara*.

otism and an inflated nationalistic ego. Disguised by the notion of “superior races or nations”, such fiery patriots soaked the earth with floods of blood. The virtue that transcends local boundaries is not the annihilation of positive cultural qualities (impersonal immersion into abstract humanity), but the pinnacle of moral standards where we discern the common denominators of all races, nations and individuals, which remind us of the everlasting words of Confucius:⁷ *“I don’t know much, but I know the oneness which permeates everything.”* The philosophical equivalent in Zen Buddhism we find in the words of Hakuin’s song of meditation:⁸

*“All beings are from the very beginning the Buddhas;
It is like ice and water;
Apart from water no ice can exist,
Outside sentient beings, where do we seek the Buddha?”*

In the first line we read *all beings are from the very beginning the Buddhas*, not only “chosen souls or nations”, not only the learned and famous, but all in its literal sense of the word; including those who are abandoned, ostracized and ignorant. Hakuin encompasses all sentient beings who are called to reveal in their innermost beings the Buddha nature which reminds us of the following passage of the last chapter in the book “Siddharta”, written by Herman Hesse:⁹

“He (Govinda) no longer saw his friend Siddharta face; instead he saw other faces, many, a long row, a streaming river of faces, hundreds, thousands, which all came and faded, and yet seemed all to be there at once, which kept changing and being renewed, and yet which all were Siddharta. He saw the face of a fish, a carp, with a mouth open in infinite pain, a dying fish, with breaking eyes – he saw the face of a new-born child, red and wrinkled, twisted with weeping – he saw the face of a murderer, saw him plunge a knife in another man’s body – he saw, in the same second, this criminal chained and kneeling and his head chopped off by a stroke of the executioner’s ax – he saw the naked bodies of men and women in positions and struggles of raging love – he saw corpses stretched out, still, cold, empty – he saw the heads of animals, of boars or crocodiles, of elephants, of bulls, of birds, – he saw gods, saw Krishna, saw Agni – he saw all these shapes and faces in a thousand interrelations, each helping the others, loving them, hating them, destroying them,

7 Confucius’ favourite saying serves as the gist of his philosophy – the idea of reciprocity is present in major religions. In the Eastern philosophy, reciprocity reflects the notion of *karma*.

8 Alan W. Watts (1958), *The Spirit of Zen*, New York: Grove Press Inc. p. 46.

9 Heram Hesse (2003), *Siddhartha*, New York: Penguin Books, p. 130.

bearing them anew...And Govinda saw that Siddharta's smiling face, this smile of the oneness over the streaming formations, this smile of simultaneity over the thousand births and deaths..."

The oneness, melted into myriads of forms (yet remaining the impeccable inner smile of true enlightenment),¹⁰ wins over diversity, which spread from worst culprits to remarkable saints, from saddened backsliders to shiny stars of divinized human beings, from filthy whores to devoted hermits, from most corrupted psychopaths to innocent toddlers. The following Zen experience confirms the above mentioned:¹¹ *"It was beyond description and altogether incommunicable, for there was nothing in the world to which it could be compared...As I looked around and up and down, the whole universe with its multitudinous sense-objects now appeared quite different; what was loathsome before, together with ignorance and passion, was seen to be nothing else but the outflow of my own inmost nature, which in itself remained bright, true and transparent."* The final destination is not an arrogant victory, but the acceptance of everyone, the "melting pot" of sacred pilgrimage where boastfulness is replaced by silent smile; bearing a bit of sadness as an inedible trace of sainthood, which is found on the verge of despair, on the verge of failure. How far is that from narcissistic self-indulgence masked by piety in which vanity destroys virtue through displaying severe strictness towards others but pathetic submissiveness towards his own faults and hideous sins. Even if we are as pristine as snow, vanity distorts and corrupts the very source of our magnificent deeds and spiritual achievements. The first and final lesson in ethics is: never feel superior, even if you perform miraculous acts of charity, even if you resurrect the dead, even if you can fly over highest mountains, even if you know by heart holy scriptures.

Socrates did not accept himself as an all-knowing sage, he was far from "ex-cathedra" philosophy, which has all answers but no questions, and, although a charismatic person, he grasped the bottomless abyss of ignorance and fragility of preconceived answers. Therefore, he never offered the ultimate answers as "the bee-lines" to the deepest metaphysical problems of human existence. Instead of preaching predetermined and absolute truths, Socrates explicitly expressed his own ignorance, which he recognized in all human endeavors and sophisticated forms of describing "what philosophy is". As a master interrogator, Socrates established the method of trying to reach the

¹⁰ The state of "Zen enlightenment is understood as "awakening" in the midst of ordinary life where we find the unexpected link between seemingly trivial actions and the reflection of *satori*. Apart from "sparkles of satori / nirvana Buddhist concept of *paranirvana* (as the highest form of enlightenment) transcends the boundaries of transiency and temporary existence.

¹¹ Alan W. Wats (1958), *The Spirit of Zen*, New York: Grove Press Inc. p. 68.

truth by persistent questioning, believing that all sentient beings possess the inner beauty and divine wisdom as their true nature, which is suppressed by mundane hectic pace of life, blatant lies of conformism and widely cherished “guidelines to happiness”. There is no short-cut to metaphysics that can be delivered as “the instant truth” – all of us are challenged to thoroughly examine our deepest potentials. Socrates’ notable statement: “*I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance*”¹² should not be taken in its literal sense as the final and ultimate failure to grasp the core of meaningful existence. His household statement is often misunderstood as the inevitable spiritual disappointment due to human incapacity to reach the ultimate truth and consequently serves as the cheap apology for negligence and meaningless relativism. The reverse is closer to truth – the more Socrates insisted that he knows nothing, the more we are convinced that he knew much more than his fellow citizens. His notorious affirmation is more likely the proof of profound metaphysical knowledge, which is inexpressible in words not because of its shallowness but its transcendental nature. If the ultimate knowledge could be verbalized to its full extent, that would contradict the very nature of philosophical insight and reduce its lucidity to a mere word game. We should never forget that words are just signifiers – like traffic signs, which mean that without “walking” we will never reach the final goal – just like reading menus will not satisfy our hunger. Traffic signs show the way – the rest is our responsibility; we must walk towards the destination designated by “traffic signs”. Letters and words (spoken or written) are pointers, but the meaning is “behind” words, like the index finger pointing at the moon (if we are focused on the finger, we miss the beauty of the moon).

The attempt to find truth in merely abstract forms is futile and it leads to nowhere due to its detachment and elusiveness. In spite of the embellished intellectual forms, traditional academic philosophy is nothing more than the long set of perplexing descriptions that are vague and often paradoxical. The sense of “nowness” is directly oriented towards the immediate reality which is the “the speck of golden luck” and the source of inextinguishable benedictions if we do whatever we do in the spirit of nobility. This sense of “nowness” as the unique and irrevocable chance to lift our spirit in ordinary matters is hidden in the following Zen messages:¹³

To the question “What is enlightenment?” a Zen master replied: “Your everyday thoughts”, while another when asked: “What is the Tao?” answered: “Usual life is the very Tao.” The similar spirit of “sacred nowness” we can dis-

12 See in the „The Philosophy book“ edited by Sam Atkinson (2011), DK London, p. 49.

13 Alan W. Wats (1958), *The Spirit of Zen*, New York: Grove Press Inc. p. 48.

cern in Socrates' questioning as the philosophical effort to define virtues (such as justice and goodness) with bystanders (potential interlocutors). Namely, Socrates did not prepare philosophical lectures – his questioning was far from traditional teaching and deliberate performance; the very moment (which is per nature unique and unprecedented) decides the line of questioning. This is in harmony with what Thomas Kempis wrote in the *Imitation of Christ*: “If thy heart were right, then every creature would be a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine. There is no creature so small and abject, but it reflects the goodness of God.”¹⁴

The idea of “sacred nowness” can be misleading if we assume that all we should do is to embrace uncritically the present, which, as a constant flow, must not be interrupted by our interventions. “To go with the flow” sounds as a false philosophy that is nothing but blind negligence. To embrace seemingly irrelevant trifles as “specks of golden dust” means the following: the greatness of our deeds is not its appearance, but the spirit and intentions of the one involved in daily duties. To find bigness in smallness is per definition philosophical gift, which is indeed rare and therefore more precious. Sipping coffee as well as sweeping the garden or preparing breakfast could be precious spiritual exercise if we use the best potentials and adamant willingness to do “nothing less than the best”. The spirit of love determines the quality of our deeds – therefore watering flowers could be more meritorious than writing heavy philosophical books. Socrates did not allow himself to kill freshness and uniqueness of “nowness” by acting as a performer in “an apple-pie order” typical for “ex-cathedra” style. Instead of lecturing, Socrates exposed himself to the unexpected – to “what has never been and never will be”, right in the streets where he could meet perpetrators, prostitutes and potential disciples. He was not protected by educational facilities, his wisdom is not integrated in the attentively designed curriculum, Socrates' approach was more eliciting wisdom than transmitting prefabricated chunks of knowledge, just as philosophy in the Zen Buddhist sense is primarily the way of moral purification, strict self-discipline and self-restrain. Intruders in the Eastern philosophy brazenly seek the immediate gratification instead of firmly facing their own deficiencies. “I want everything and I want it now” is the shallowest hedonistic trend in our consumer societies, where instructions “for dummies” mislead many youngsters into a chaotic and devastating life. Some of self-proclaimed spiritual teachers preach animal instead of divine wisdom thus opening the gates of hell and excruciating pain for their gullible followers. Immediate gratification is often a bee-line to pandemonium instead to blissfulness. Zen Buddhism requires

14 Ibid. 48.

brave and determined individuals who are able to discern delusion and lunacy behind trivial hedonism. This must be clarified to avoid common misconceptions such as: Zen Buddhism is like Crowley law of Thelema¹⁵ – all we should do is to fulfill all our desires – regardless of pain we inflict on the other. Such distortions of authentic Zen Buddhism are, unfortunately, frequent in western countries. Socrates, apart from accepting unprecedented “now” as “speck of golden dust”, emphasized the moral power as the major philosophical source and the final outcome. We must walk against the mainstream of the contemporary world, the message of which is to be restless, to cherish uncontrollable ambitions, to follow Machiavelli’s principle “the end justifies the means.” The following thought is attributed to Socrates: “*Beware the barrenness of a busy life!*” Isn’t it true that we respect “a man of action” – someone who is always busy, an achiever whose energy is solely focused on material goals, who belittles others because of “having less”? Zen Buddhism and Socrates turn the mundane philosophy upside down – which is nothing but perverted blasphemy of true wisdom. Instead of hustle and bustle, Zen Buddhists strive for moral perfection, for the constant betterment of our character. Being on the surface on the world, enjoying in gossiping and idleness (or meaningless rat race), we lose the touch with our Buddha nature (which is in Christianity *Imago Dei*).

SOCRATES' AND ZEN BUDDHISTIC METAPHYSICS

The transcendental life is attainable only if we perform our duties with highest care and devotion to details – which is insignificant for those possessed by monstrous mundane spirit whose beastly appetite devours lives of others. Zen pedantry is genuine respect for every crumb of bread as a divine gift. Listen to the story about a drop of water:

A Zen master named Gisan asked a young student to bring him a pail of water to cool his bath. The student brought the water and, after cooling the bath, threw on to the ground the little that was left over. “You dunce!” the master scolded him. “Why didn’t you give the rest of the water to the plants? What right have you to waste even one drop of water in this temple?”
The young student attained Zen in that instant. He changed his name to Tekisui, which means a drop of water.

15 Crowley „law“ of Thelema is allegedly revealed by a spiritual entity. Thelema is commonly understood as the liberation of darkness, or unleashing of “the shadow” in human beings which often leads to devastating consequences.

The concepts of heaven and hell are not academic questions in Zen Buddhism. The following story expresses the spirit of Zen (when it comes to sophisticated matters):

Hakuin, the fiery and intensely dynamic Zen master, was once visited by a samurai warrior:

“I want to know about heaven and hell,” said the samurai. “Do they really exist?” he asked Hakuin.

Hakuin looked at the soldier and asked, “Who are you?”

“I am a samurai,” announced the proud warrior.

“Ha!” exclaimed Hakuin. “What makes you think you can understand such insightful things? You are merely a callous, brutish soldier! Go away and do not waste my time with your foolish questions,” Hakuin said, waving his hand to drive away the samurai. The enraged samurai couldn’t take Hakuin’s insults. He drew his sword, readied for the kill, when Hakuin calmly retorted, “This is hell.”

The soldier was taken aback. His face softened. Humbled by the wisdom of Hakuin, he put away his sword and bowed before the Zen Master.

“And this is heaven,” Hakuin stated, just as calmly.

Heaven is opened by calmness, while the way of rage and hostility leads to hell. Instead of sophisticated theology or academic debates, Zen Buddhism directly relates to the essential notions such as the existence of heaven and hell. Embellished intellectual elaborations are not in harmony with Zen Buddhist understanding of life. Verbosity is the feature of the western tradition of philosophy, which is miles away from the eastern spirit reflected in abridged and condensed thoughts – seemingly simple but highly relevant and profound. No matter how hard we try, we will never find final and resolute definitions of the nature of the “great beyond” in Zen Buddhism.¹⁶ The following questions remained unsolved: Is heaven permanent, indestructible and inexpressible blissfulness in the state of never-ceasing spiritual joy? What is the nature of our true self (innermost being)? Does soul exist? Is there any celestial entity which, out of nothingness (*ex nihilo*), created the entire universe? What is the final destination for obstinate sinners? Is hell only a metaphorical word

¹⁶ Both the Soto and Rinzai schools of Zen Buddhism accept the essential qualities of the “final goal” – satori, although they discern two different paths towards the ultimate destination. Soto school places a great significance on *zazen* (sitting meditation), while the Rinzai schools intensively use *koan* the “Zen paradox” which forces the disciple to overcome limits of common rationality.

or the true existence of enormous pain and dreadful suffering? If we seek the ultimate answers to such questions, we must be disappointed. Zen Buddhism is more about pragmatic spirituality that sends the message: if heaven and hell exist, there is only one way to gain the heaven and avoid the hell – serenity of mind and harmlessness of heart. In any case, calmness and nobility are highly cherished virtues which provide the maximum of happiness in this world and “buy the ticket” for the “great beyond” – if it exists. We will never be “saved” from the “life and death circle” by sheer intellectual effort. The way of salvation and enlightenment is the purification of human being, which is not reduced to either mind or heart – the way of spiritual liberation comprises our totality.

INSTEAD OF SUMMARY

In a similar fashion, Socrates rejected pure intellectual way, which leaves our life detached and captivated by the blind force of inertia. Therefore, he emphasized the relevance of moral power and ethical values – without explicit and non-negotiable (axiomatic) statements regarding the substance of life and its ontological nature. The way of redemption from ignorance and hellish darkness is highly demanding – it insists on our readiness to modify whatever is questionable from moral point of view. Thus, Socrates walked in a line with Zen Buddhists – they share essentially the same insight in human corrupted nature and “divine” potentials of every single individual. Without self-restraint and self-discipline the whole philosophy is mere intellectual game which is “petty crime” of spoilt and irresponsible scholars. Socrates and Zen Buddhists agree upon the following: the deepest meaning of life is elusive – we will never grasp its depth by solely intellectual means. The final destination is attainable “here and now” in the forms of sparks of virtuous life, which “divinizes” even the most ordinary deeds. Therefore chopping wood and carrying water could be minute enlightenments – “an infinitesimal *satori*” – which is the reason for devotion to seemingly irrelevant details. Every single word and the smallest passing thought, all these “trifles” are flickering flames of a sudden realization that blissfulness is nothing extraordinary. There is something childlike in the philosophy of Socrates and Zen Buddhism; while the mundane scholars walk boastfully, Socrates and Buddhists unceasingly seek the ultimate truth, which is hidden in little acts of charity, in the spirit of benevolence and open-mindedness.

REFERENCE LIST

- Abe, Masao; William R. LeFleur (translator) (1989), *Zen and Western Thought*, University of Hawaii Press.
- Aitken, Robert (1994), *Foreword to »A Buddhist Bible«*, Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Alan W. Wats (1958), *The Spirit of Zen*, New York: Grove Press.
- Batchelor, Martine (2004), *The Path Of Compassion: The Bodhisattva Precepts*, Rowman Altamira.
- Borup, Jørn (2008), *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism: Myōshinji, a Living Religion*, Brill Publishers.
- Bruell, C. (1999). *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Dumonlin, Heinrich (2000), *A History of Zen Buddhism*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Harvey, Peter (1995), *An introduction to Buddhism. Teachings, history and practices*, Cambridge University Press.
- Hermann Hesse (2003), *Siddhartha*, New York: Penguin Books.
- Huaijin, Nan (1997), *Basic Buddhism: Exploring Buddhism and Zen*, York Beach: Samuel Weiser.
- Kalupahana, David J. (1994), *A history of Buddhist philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited.
- Levinson, Paul (2007). *The Plot to Save Socrates*. New York: Tor Books.
- Low, Albert (2000), *Zen and the Sutras*, Boston: Turtle Publishing.
- Luce, J.V. (1992). *An Introduction to Greek Philosophy*, Thames & Hudson, NY.
- May, Hope (2000). *On Socrates*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- McRae, John (2003), *Seeing Through Zen*, The University Press Group Ltd.
- Sharf, Robert H. (1995-C), »Sanbokyodan. Zen and the Way of the New Religions«, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1995 22/3-4.
- Shimano, Eido T. (1991), *Points of Departure: Zen Buddhism With a Rinzai View*, Livingston Manor, NY: The Zen Studies Society Press.
- Vlastos, Gregory (1991). *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

NEBOJŠA VASIĆ

Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Zenici, BiH

SOKRATOV ZEN BUDIZAM

Sažetak: Zen budizam je samo jedan od mnogih puteva prosvetljenja koji, kao snažan pokušaj direktnog kretanja ka cilju, sve prepreke ostavlja po strani. Poput Sokratove filozofije, zen budizam odbacuje verbalizam i puka opisivanja; on nema strpljenja za akademske finese dok, lišen doktrinarnosti, insistira na dijalogu umesto na racionalnom izlaganju metafizičkih pitanja. U zen budizmu (kao ni u Sokratovoj filozofiji) uobičajene norme logike i ispravnog rasuđivanja ne igraju presudnu ulogu; povrh toga, tipični *ex cathedra* pristup napušten je u korist premošćivanja jaza između pojma i neposrednog iskustva. Reči i prikazi samo nagovešćuju ono „nepoznato“, koje je daleko iznad teorije, beseda i poučavanja. Stoga je zen često označen kao „direktnost“, odnosno kao neposredna svesnost o večito menjajućem toku života, miljama udaljenom od pukih racionalizacija, koje kao takve nisu ništa drugo nego mrtvi simboli žive zbiljnosti. Sokratovo učenje i zen neguju ideju neposrednosti čina, čime izražavaju kako ideju „duhovnog siromaštva“, tako i besmislenost definicija koje velom prekrivaju „konačnu istinu“, a tražioca odvrćaju od najkraćeg puta ka *satoriju*. Ideja posedovanja je iluzorna (bilo da je reč o materijalnom ili duhovnom posedu), a sledstveno tome, život nikada ne može biti pojmljen, niti precizno definisan – drugim rečima, neuhvatljiva supstancija života bliska je pojmu ne-vezanosti. Duhovna sloboda se otkriva u čovekovoju urođenoju sposobnosti da sledi večito promenljivi tok života izbegavajući obe krajnosti – onu slepog prihvatanja sudbine, kao i jalove, grozničave užurbanosti našeg modernog sveta.

Ključne reči: Sokrat, zen budizam, dijalog, *satori*, direktnost, „konačna istina“, neuhvatljiva supstancija, duhovno siromaštvo

Primljeno: 10.2.2014.

Prihvaćeno: 4.5.2014.